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ABSTRACT

This speech outlines the plight of black people under the present federal government administration. It is stated that the administration is not living up to the First Commandment of politics; that is, to help those who helped it. The administration has failed black people since it has not adequately addressed itself to a new domestic policy. The urban areas are dying because local politics are aimed at killing inner city neighborhoods. It is suggested that a national urban policy be developed. This should have three major components: (1) federally supported and directed increases in basic social services, (2) massive creation of housing opportunities for low and moderate income families and (3) an urban economic development program that includes guaranteed jobs for all who can work and an income assistance system. Finally the administration should signal the nation's poor that their interests will be met by meaningful reform of the welfare system. The National Urban League supports a long-range plan to use a refundable credit income tax as the means of assuring a minimum income level beneath which no family could fall. This plan includes four steps: (1) a massive job creation program, (2) food stamp expansion, (3) major improvements in social insurance programs, including a national health insurance plan, and (4) a refundable tax credit. This speech concludes by calling on blacks and upon their leadership to create a new structure that will enable blacks to act in unison and to maximize efforts that will help all blacks in need. (Author/AM)

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Keynote Address By

VERNON E. JORDAN, JR

Executive Director

NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE

at

67th ANNUAL CONFERENCE

of the

NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE

Washington Hilton Hotel

WASHINGTON, D. C.

Sunday, July 24, 1977

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Once again we meet in our nation's capital. Once again, the National Urban League Movement convenes to press the just demands of black citizens upon a newly-installed national government.

It is well to recall that our last Annual Conference in this City was held while guns and bombs were bringing death and destruction in Vietnam, while high officials were covering up the Watergate scandal, and while a hostile Administration was trying to roll back the gains made by black citizens.

Today, the atmosphere is radically different. The guns of war are silent. Corruption, cover-up, and the abuse of power have gone out of style. And a new Administration is openly consulting citizens' groups in policy formulation, while giving new recognition to the sanctity of human rights.

In the White House, we have a President whose devotion to equal opportunity is unquestioned. Long before he became our President, Jimmy Carter was our friend. Long before he was even a candidate for the Presidency, Governor Jimmy Carter of Georgia came to Urban League meetings proudly wearing our equality pin in his lapel. And now, as President of the United States, he will honor us by coming to speak at this National Urban League Annual Conference.

In the short time he has been President, Mr. Carter has impressed us with his personal style. He has helped heal the wounds of a divided nation by deflating the "imperial Presidency," by reaching out to his fellow citizens, and by backing an amnesty program that seeks to put the horrors of Vietnam behind us.

President Carter has touched us deeply by stressing the importance of human rights in a world that commonly flaunts those precious innate rights, and this is a cause that speaks to our hearts with a special significance.

President Carter has won our admiration by pursuing an African policy that, for the first time in our history, treats the aspirations of Black Africa with respect and encouragement.

These, and other accomplishments of the new Administration won our support. The style of openness and access to decision-makers has breathed new life into our form of government. The symbolic acts of the Administration have put us back in touch with our leaders.

Why then, do we convene in Washington with troubled minds and heavy hearts? Why then, are black people disenchanted with the Administration they elected? And why do so many black people feel that their hopes and their needs have been betrayed?

The sad fact is that the list of what the Administration has not done far exceeds its list of accomplishments. The sad fact is that the Administration is not living up to the First Commandment of politics -- to help those who helped you.

The Administration has formulated a new foreign policy, a new defense policy and a new energy policy. But it has not adequately addressed itself to a new domestic policy. We have no full employment policy. We have no welfare reform policy. We have no national health policy. We have no urban revitalization policy. We have no aggressive affirmative action policy. We have no national solutions to the grinding problems of poverty and discrimination.

To paraphrase Winston Churchill, "never have so many expected so much and received so little."

A limited jobs program is not enough. An enlightened African policy is not enough. An expanded housing policy is not enough. A handful of top black appointments is not enough. An open style without substantive change is not enough. And it is not enough to do better than Nixon or Ford. Black people didn't vote for Nixon and didn't vote for Ford. They voted for President Carter, and it is not enough for President Carter to be just a little better than his predecessors.

Black people, having tasted the sweetness of victory in November, resent the sour taste of disappointment in July. Black people and poor people resent the stress on balanced budgets instead of balanced lives. We resent unfulfilled promises of jobs, compromises to win conservative support, and the continued acceptance of high unemployment.

Our resentment is fueled by impatience. We, who have been patient for so long are finally running out of patience. The cries of pain

from impoverished rural areas and urban slums ring out, and cannot be stilled by minor measures. Our longing for true equality will not cease, nor will it be diverted by stylistic flourishes.

In some ways, ours has been a learning experience. Black people are learning the callousness of political reality. We are learning that electing a President is not enough. We are learning that the forces of entrenched power will not easily accommodate our demands for change. We are learning that we must raise our voices and must use our political power with the same determination as do those who oppose us. We are learning that even an Administration sympathetic to our needs and in harmony with our aspirations needs sustained pressure.

We are here in Washington to apply some of that pressure. We are here in Washington to call on this Administration to fulfill its promises. We are here in Washington to recall this Administration to what we feel is its true spirit, the spirit of social reform and racial equality. We are here in Washington to help it escape from the evils of premature political compromise, narrow fiscal conservatism, and indefinite delays in implementing reforms. We are here to file our claim, to collect on the campaign promises made in black churches and black neighborhoods.

We understand that the nature of the political process is such that all of our needs cannot be met at once. But we

call on the Administration to start sending signals that indicate it understands our needs and will make them its own.

One such signal should be the immediate withdrawal of the disastrous proposal to abolish the Electoral College in favor of direct popular election of the President. This seemingly democratic change would have undemocratic results. It would weaken the political power of the cities and the poor, and it would unbalance our political system. Do away with the Electoral College, and in 1980 the black vote will not make the difference it did in 1976.

It is unseemly for an Administration that owes its existence to solid black electoral support to propose a new system whose effect would be to sabotage that support by diluting black voting power. And it is outrageous that the Congress has forced the Administration to compromise its plan for a system of universal Election Day registration.

Another signal should be for the Administration to come up with a serious program to save our nation's cities. The so-called urban crisis has become almost a cliché, stripped of meaning by repetition and misunderstanding.

There are those who believe the urban crisis is really just a fiscal crisis, and that shoveling federal dollars into city treasuries will solve it. But the problem goes far deeper, for the urban crisis has a human face to it. It is a crisis of national morality and of our national willingness to tolerate

poverty and despair. And it is the direct result of over two decades of conscious public and private policies designed to de-populate cities and strip them of their economic capabilities.

Public and private policies moved population and job opportunities to the suburbs, and at the same time restocked the cities with poor people. Now there is general recognition that the process has gone too far. An energy-dependent society is beginning to realize that energy-efficient cities are necessary once more. The suburban dream has become tarnished and middle class people are again looking to the cities, where abandoned housing and cheap land are economically tempting to developers.

Race and economics once more interact to the detriment of the black poor. Black slums have suddenly become targets for "rehabilitation." Speculators reap profits while black homeowners and renters are squeezed by the cycle of high demand, rising land values, and higher property taxes.

If our cities are dying it is not through natural death or even self-inflicted suicide; it is through local policies aimed at killing inner-city neighborhoods that they may be reborn for the benefit of the well-off. HUD's tougher policy ensuring that bloc grants are used, as the law demands, for poor people's housing is a commendable attempt to counter this growing phenomenon.

The process of saving the cities must not be a process of driving out the poor to house the middle class, but a process of helping the poor to become middle income. The ultimate future of our cities and of our nation may depend upon the success of that effort.

We stepped to the edge of the abyss the other day, when the plug was pulled on New York's electricity. The looting that occurred could have happened in any city in our country. All our cities contain large numbers of people who have no stake in this society, who are without jobs or hope, whose despair and anger simmers continually, until it boils over, past the limits of accepted behavior.

They are the victims of a society that willfully destroys its own cities. The destruction they wrought was a more violent mirror image of the destruction of lives and neighborhoods caused by impersonal forces in our society -- discrimination, unemployment, poverty. Lawlessness cannot be condoned, but our society must draw the right conclusions from such terrible incidents --people have to be assured of a stake in the society; they must have jobs and decent housing if we want them to act in conformity with society's rules. The resources that will be spent to repair the damages could have been better spent in preventive programs that might have avoided the disaster.

But the tragedy in New York offers the President an opportunity to exercise bold leadership. We ask tonight that President Carter signal to the nation his concern for the cities and for the poor who live in them by going to New York; by speaking with the looters and the looted in the South bronx, Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant. A nation of cities is adrift in confusion and the President of all the people has to show his concern. He has to show he understands the despair and

the anger, the hopes and the needs, of the urban poor. Yes, if the President can go to Clinton and to Yazoo City, he can go to New York.

We call on the President and the Congress to formulate a national urban policy that deals with the human problems of people who live in cities. Cities have to be saved, not for those who abandoned them and then changed their minds, but for those who live in them today.

And a national urban policy cannot be restricted to bricks and mortar showpieces, or to further wasteful revenue sharing programs. It must have three major components:

1) Federally-supported and directed increases in basic social services -- health, education,transportation, and youth programs.

2) Massive creation of housing opportunities for low and moderate income families, within a national housing policy that assures a decent, safe and sanitary home for every family, and

3) A federal urban economic development program that includes guaranteed jobs for all who can work and an income assistance system.

Finally, the Administration should signal the nation's poor that their interests will be met by meaningful reform of the welfare system that is supposed to provide assistance to those most in need, but does not. Candidate Carter called it a "disgrace," and President Carter has ordered his Administration to come up with a reform proposal.

The basic outlines of the Administration's package have been made public, and they indicate that a real change is not in sight. Although the reform was to result in a system that would be equitable, simple to administer, promote family stability, and help the poor, we are likely to have to fight a plan that is inequitable, an administrative nightmare, promotes family instability and leaves many poor people worse off.

This plan founders on major conceptual flaws. Among them are the mandates to keep a ceiling on costs no greater than present welfare-related programs, categorization of the poor, and a work requirement. Such measures would continue to stigmatize poor people while perpetuating negative myths about the poor. And a bad plan may be made even worse. There was one proposal to eliminate the federal housing subsidy program in order to transfer the money to the welfare program, a step that makes no sense at all. It would have destroyed already under-funded federal housing programs while further distorting welfare reform and like other elements of the welfare reform plan, it would take from some poor people to give to other poor people.

The core of the welfare reform proposal links work to welfare, and thus perpetuates the vicious myth that poor people don't want to work. The fact is that poor people do want to work and do work. The fact is that poor people are as work-oriented as middle class people.

Our purpose tonight is not to further criticize a bad plan but to offer an alternative that would benefit poor people and the nation.

The National Urban League is on record in support of a long-range plan to use a refundable credit income tax as the means of assuring a minimum income level beneath which no family could fall. We continue to support that plan,

but recognizing that political reality now prevents its acceptance, we call tonight for an interim plan that would supplement the present welfare system and ease the plight of poor people while putting in place structures for ultimate reform.

Our interim plan includes four major steps:

1) A massive job-creation program. We should have an expanded federal program of public service jobs, and job-creation incentives to private industry, targeted to high unemployment areas.

2) Food Stamp expansion. The food stamp program has become a major source of income assistance. By eliminating the cash requirement, simplifying and broadening eligibility, and launching an aggressive outreach program, food stamps can become the vehicle for helping all of the poor and near-poor.

3) Major improvements in social insurance programs including a national health insurance plan. Extending and improving programs that cushion the effects of unemployment and economic losses due to health problems will reduce the numbers of people forced to resort to welfare assistance.

4) A refundable tax credit. Ultimately, we envisage this as a means to drastically shrink the welfare rolls, but a start can be made now by using the tax system to provide modified income assistance.

Thus by instituting a refundable tax credit and applying it to grants for low-income families, even a modest grant would remove significant numbers of people from the welfare rolls while providing aid for those whose welfare benefits are inadequate and those who are poor or near-poor and do not

receive welfare payments. This proposal would shrink the welfare rolls and would reduce the dependence on the welfare system through a more equitable tax system.

This interim plan would be real reform. By instituting this plan, the Administration can refuse to become part of the institutional retreat from civil rights that is infecting the nation. In almost all sectors of national life we see former friends relaxing into indifference, and former foes back on the attack. National policies of neglect and recession have combined to make many people in the private sector less concerned with fulfilling their responsibilities.

The Congress seems more anxious to ban busing, to limit affirmative action programs and to bar Medicaid funds for abortions than it is to improve the schools, enforce civil rights, or to enable meaningful life after birth. But that same Congress was giving every indication of being willing to pour billions of dollars down the drain on the B-1 bomber before the President's bold and far-sighted decision not to go ahead with production.

The symbol of institutional retreat is the Supreme Court. Once the proud defender of the rights of minorities and the disadvantaged, this Nixon-dominated Court has become a source of denial of equal opportunities. The protector of our rights has slowly slid into the position of becoming the enemy of those rights.

The Court has retreated to the cramped narrow legalisms of supposed neutrality and objectivity. It has formulated the

legal doctrine of "intent to discriminate" as a replacement for the more realistic legal requirement of proving discriminatory effects. In its last term, the Court upheld discriminatory zoning laws and discriminatory seniority systems. It denied to poor women the opportunity for abortion available to more affluent women, and it is shocking for the Administration and the Congress to have supported the Court in this callous act.

It is in this Court then, so vastly different from the Warren Court that protected and extended civil rights, that the Bakke case will be decided.

We urge the Administration to recognize the importance of this case and the issues involved by filing an amicus brief asking the Court to uphold the University's admissions program.

By the standards of legality, morality and plain common sense, affirmative action programs are legitimate and necessary. And the intensity of the opposition to affirmative action is yet another example of the painful fact that the national mood still resists accommodation to the just needs of black and minority people. It still resists making necessary changes in our society to provide equal opportunity. The national search for roots is degenerating into mere nostalgia, instead of drawing lessons from the hardships forced upon our forebears and those of other ethnic groups.

And yet, because we hear the true call of our roots, because we draw inspiration from those who came before us and on whose accomplishments we build, we are unshakable in our determination to overcome. While we continue to impress upon the Administration, the Congress, and the public and

private sectors, the justice of our cause, we have another job to do.

We must capitalize on the latent strengths of the black community. We must marshall our considerable economic and political power to improve our communities. We must bend every effort to instill in our young people a devotion to excellence and a determination to succeed.

Those of us in leadership positions have a still larger responsibility. We cannot lessen our pressures for constructive change. We cannot allow our personal or political loyalties to deflect us from the task of fighting for our rights. This applies as much to local leadership as it does to the national leadership of black institutions.

It is in this context that we must urge our black brothers and sisters in government to recognize the important role they can play. We are proud of them. Every announcement from the White House of the appointment of a black person to a federal position was met with pride. At long last there are enough black people at the higher echelons of government to form a critical mass capable of exerting a major influence on policy. Most of these black federal executives come from backgrounds of militant activism, and the fervor and passion they brought to the civil rights movement must continue to characterize their actions.

Just as they were on guard for civil rights 24 hours a day, so too must they continue that vigilance in their new jobs. Just as they once prodded the Executive Branch,

the Congress, and the courts with ceaseless demands for change, so too must they continue to raise the kinds of issues we have raised tonight.

Black federal executives are uniquely situated to become catalysts of change. They can maximize their strengths by coming together in an informal network of conscious interdependence and shared resources. All of our nation's institutions have run on the wheels of a well-oiled "buddy system" of mutual protection and mutual aid that excluded blacks and other minorities. So the inevitable lesson is that black and minority officials should come together in a similar system of shared support that will increase the influence of black executives and, more importantly, of the policies they are fighting for.

I cannot urge greater mutuality and cooperation among black federal executives without recognizing the need for closer cooperation among national black leadership. With a national mood that ranges from indifference to hostility, with crucial national decisions being made without due consideration of their impact on black people, and with black institutional strength diluted because of lack of unified strategies, it is time for black leadership to come together once again.

On those occasions when we have coordinated strategies, such as last year's voter registration campaign, we have been successful. It is time now to extend that success to other areas and other issues. It is time now for national black

civil rights leadership to come together in a revived leadership group, in structured, planned meetings of heads of national organizations to pool our strengths and strategies.

So I call tonight on my colleagues to join with me in a meeting next month to begin the process of coordination on behalf of all of America's black and poor people. Our meetings should be held in private. They should deal with issues and strategies. They should be structured around the concerns of our constituents.

I am confident they will share my belief that it is imperative for black leadership to create a new structure that will enable us to act in unison and to maximize our efforts on behalf of our constituents. For if we don't do it, who will? We can call on the President to push for social changes; we can call on the Congress, we can call on the private sector, but in the last analysis what must be done, we must do ourselves. We need alliances and coalitions but the initiative and the urgency must be ours.

We take our cue from Frederick Douglass, who wisely counseled: "Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow. ... You know that liberty given is never so precious as liberty sought for and fought for. The man outraged is the man to make the outcry. Depend on it, men will not care much for a people who do not care for themselves."

I am confident that we can succeed, we shall overcome. The path, as always, will be difficult, but it is an American path, and that is why I am confident.

Last year I was in South Africa and two weeks ago I was in Russia. Seeing oppressive dictatorships of the right and the left convinces me that however far America may be from attaining its national goals and ideals, America is fertile soil for human fulfillment.

The plane that brought me home from Russia landed in New York during the blackout. The lights were out all over the city. But despite the inconvenience and the attendant problems, I'd rather be here in the United States with the lights out than behind the Iron Curtain with the lights on. We have many just criticisms to make of our nation, but this speech could not be given in Russia or South Africa, and we could not dissent from national policies or pressure national leadership in Russia or South Africa.

Having visited such countries that are built on vicious denial of human rights, I take heart from our new national policy of worldwide support for the sanctity of human rights. When a Vorster kills young black people in Soweto, when a Brezhnev sends dissenters to prison camps, when an Amin senselessly slaughters his own people, all mankind is diminished. All mankind bleeds on the rack of the torturers, whoever they may be and wherever they may commit their crimes.

But this new American crusade for human rights and decency in the world must not become prey to hypocrisy and to cynicism. Our nation cannot call for respect for human rights while it lacks the moral courage to save its own cities, its own poor, its own minorities whose rights are trampled upon. The real moral equivalent of war in our times is the moral challenge

to construct a just and equal society.

So our concern with human rights in the world must be joined by similar concern for basic human rights here at home. As long as our society denies equality of opportunity for its minorities, jobs for all who can work and income security for all who need it, our advocacy of human rights will be met by scorn throughout the world. We cannot preach at others and sin ourselves.

It is the mission of the Urban League Movement to remind our nation of this, and to toil on behalf of black people, of minorities, of all poor people. As we begin this Conference, let us be mindful of that mission. Let us not forget who we are, from whence we came, and why we are here.

Most of us at this Conference are working; our incomes place us in the middle class. We are educated; we are among DuBois' talented tenth, and among us are found many of the black intelligentsia. We are professionals, semi-professionals, blue and white collar workers; we represent business, labor, public and private sectors.

Our forebears were slaves. Our parents struggled to put us where we are. We are the first or second generation of our families to earn degress. We are just a step ahead of the fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters who helped us. We know our roots. We know the years of toil and sweat; we know the ghettos from which we came, we remember the inferior segregated schools, the inequitable welfare system, the walls of discrimination in jobs and housing. Yes, we know all of

this first-hand and because we know what it means to be black and poor in this society, we are painfully aware that our personal gains are tenuous and insecure. We know we cannot breathe easy while our brothers and sisters are still under the heel of poverty and hardship and discrimination.

We are here at this Conference then, not for ourselves, but for them. We are here on behalf of our brothers and sisters, some of whom don't know who we are or what we're about, but they send us a message, an urgent message, to lead, to produce, to make their futures brighter and more secure. They're depending on us. Who will speak for them? Who will fight for them? In a society that consigns black people to the bottom rung, it is the Urban League and other institutions in the black community that stand by their goals,their interests, their needs.

So we're here in Washington to work for the brothers and the sisters. We're not here to party or to play, but to plan and to pressure. We have to demonstrate that we have not forgotten our blackness, our roots, the poverty of our people. We are a movement with a mission, and as we begin this Conference let us recall James Weldon Johnson's invocation of remembrance of homage to roots sunk deep and true:

"God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who has brought us thus far on our way,
Thou who has by Thy might
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray;

Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where
we met Thee,
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world,
we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand,
True to our God, True to our native land."

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